Ezra Pound & the Angel

Miguel Serrano

Miguel Serrano with a picture of Ezra Pound

1,136 words

Translated by Greg Johnson

From the end of the 1930s to the mid-1940s and beyond, I was greatly interested in the personality of the American poet Ezra Pound. I saw a lot of myself reflected in him. Indeed, during the Second World War he was opposed to the government of his country and embraced the cause of Italy and Germany. I did something similar by opposing the position adopted by my uncle, Joaquin Fernández y Fernandez, Minister for Foreign Relations of President Juan Antonio Rios, who was also a partisan of Germany. My uncle broke off relations with the Axis, and for many years, I broke off relations with him.

Unlike me, however, the great poet was imprisoned by his own government, first in an animal cage in Pisa, then for thirteen years in a lunatic asylum in the United States, well before the Soviets used this technique to torture political dissidents in the USSR. All that happened to me is that the Allied Powers (i.e., a foreign power, not my own fatherland) kept me on a commercial “black list” for four years, which prohibited giving me work in Chile and, I suppose, the rest of the world. It was a disaster, but nothing comparable to what happened to Ezra Pound and Knut Hamsun, another great writer and a Norwegian Nobel Prize-winner who was also locked up in a lunatic asylum, in addition to the confiscation of all his goods and properties, also for expressing his support of Germany.

Many years passed, and I heard no more of Ezra Pound. I learned, yes, that he had been released, returning immediately to Italy. He declared: “I leave the United States, because this is an immense insane asylum” . . . And he settled in Venice.

One day my secretary at the Embassy in Vienna handed me a newspaper clipping

with a photograph of Pound in London, where he attended the funeral of his friend, the poet T. S. Eliot, author of “The Waste Land,” a poem that Pound helped him compose. It also said that Ezra Pound resided at Venice.

I decided to go seek him out, traveling to this beautiful city on the Adriatic and checking into a well-known Venetian pension that had been recommended to me in India by the Italian Ambassador, Count Iusti di Giardino, owner of the famous gardens of the same name in Verona. His family resided in Onara di Tombolo. The ambassador was a great admirer of poetry and quoted Neruda in Italian from memory.

The pension that he recommended was called “A la Salute da Cici” and was in a district behind the cathedral of Salute, in Venice, close to the quays and factories where artisans created the famous Venetian glass. Only the inhabitants of the city went there, and simply giving the name of the pension was enough for the gondoliers and “vaporetto” drivers to treat you with a certain respect. Ezra Pound’s house, in Via Querini, was almost next door to the pension “Cici.” The owner, who gave me his address, told me that, yes, Ezra Pound received nobody.

I tried, without success.

I already told what happened in articles published at the time in El Mercurio. There is no need to repeat it here, since it is reproduced in the Anthology of Ezra Pound: Homage from Chile, of Armando Uribe Arce and Armando Roa Vial, recently published by the Editorial Universitaria.

The sympathetic owner of the pension finally facilitated a meeting with Ezra Pound, by advising me to pass by Udine on my return voyage to Trieste and to try to meet Mr. Ivancic, of the Italian nobility, who lived there in a palace of his family, built by the same architect as the cathedral of Salute and bombarded during the war. He was a young and spontaneous patron and friend of Hemingway, from whom he had unpublished manuscripts. He was the protector and patron of Ezra Pound, and moreover, he painted. He immediately called the poet’s house on the telephone. And I set out again that same evening for Venice, because Ezra Pound invited to me to have tea with him the next day.

I wrote of my interview in two articles: “The Cry of Silence” and “Celestial Signs in Homage to Ezra Pound.” Both were published by El Mercurio in Santiago and by La Prensa in Buenos Aires. Here I will concentrate only on the extraordinary phenomenon that I experienced there. Or rather, that we experienced there, Ezra Pound and I.

The poet kept totally silent; he did not speak; he did not say a single word. I was the one who spoke. I alone spoke, for more than half an hour. I even recited a poem of Hermann Hesse to him; I spoke to him about the war, the Cathars, the poen of Bertrand de Born, “The Praise of War,” which it would translate. Nothing; the silence was absolute.

Then, suddenly, as if by inspiration and recalling my childhood in the countryside in Chile, when “I” still did not exist and I floated above myself, “identified” with the “Guardian angel,” who watched me from above, this expression came to mind: “The second childhood of the old man.” It so happened that Ezra Pound had “left” himself and returned to his “Guardian angel.” Thus it was an error on my part to try to speak to “him,” here below, so I spoke directly to his “Angel,” there above. And then he answered me.

I will always remember what he said to me. They were prophecies, like those of Fatima, and they gave me the strength to remain firm “in the old dreams, so that our world does not lose hope…”

Ezra Pound monument, Medinaceli, Spain

I was the one who made the main effort to erect in his honor the only monument to the memory of Ezra Pound on earth today, in the town of Medinaceli, in Spain. An enormous rock from the Cantabrian Mountains was brought on mules by the villagers. In bronze letters made by village blacksmith, it was inscribed the question that Ezra Pound had asked the Spanish journalist Eugenio Montes he had visited him in Venice: “Do the roosters of Cid still crow in Medinaceli?”

For the inauguration of the monument I arrived with Ivancic and the beautiful Olga Rudge, the faithful friend of Ezra Pound. My oldest son accompanied me too. I spoke there in a choked voice, almost inaudible, with the strong emotion of a comrade.

Perhaps, in his memory, I should have spoken with the voice of silence, with the “cry of silence,” which is the best way to reach the Angel, who had already received him long, long ago.